



## Houston's Power to the People

### Building Trust in Low-income Neighborhoods

The City of Houston's Residential Energy Efficiency Program (REEP) targets low income residents by neighborhood, offering them free weatherization services. REEP engages civic and religious leaders to build trust in the program. REEP also uses creative outreach tactics such as neighborhood block parties and tabling at local communities centers to get residents to participate. The program's goal is to weatherize over half of eligible homes in target neighborhoods. In one neighborhood so far, participation reached 95% of eligible homes.

#### Background

REEP is part of a broader energy-efficiency initiative called Power to the People. REEP launched in 2006, targeting single-family homes (owned or rented) in low-income Houston neighborhoods. Neighborhoods are chosen based on the age of the housing stock, the proportion of low-income residents, and the presence of community organizations that the program can work with. Residents sign up by filling out a simple form. If their income is less than 200% of the federal poverty line, they are eligible for weather stripping, window caulking, attic insulation, energy-efficient light bulbs, and ductwork. If their income is less than 125% of the federal poverty line, they also are eligible for an EnergyStar refrigerator, EnergyStar ceiling fans, EnergyStar window air-conditioning units, and shade screens. All of these measures are free.

REEP uses a production-line approach to energy upgrades with checks and balances. After a resident signs up, an inspection contractor visits to assess their needs. Then the program assigns a different contractor to do the work. When the work is completed, the homeowner signs off. An inspection contractor inspects the work and must sign off before the weatherization contractor is paid by the program.

The program originally was designed to target neighborhoods where a majority of households were under 200% of the poverty line and then allow anyone in that neighborhood to sign up for the program. REEP now is funded by the federal Weatherization Assistance Program, so the program can only weatherize where a household meets income restrictions, and as a result, applicants have to provide proof of income. With this requirement, program managers reported a decline in applications, but participation levels have since recovered due to increased marketing.

The program selects contractors in a competitive-bidding process, and there are four, large contractors performing energy upgrades for the program. Each contractor has been assigned to a different section of the city. They try to go street-by-street to achieve economies of scale. Contractors don't waste as much time in transit and there can be word-of-mouth buzz about the program. In practice there is a tradeoff between getting enough volume for the contractors and concentrating jobs.



## **Gaining Trust in the Community**

Because the program targets low-income neighborhoods, gaining the trust of residents is a challenge. According to program manager Gavin Dillingham, the message that “we’re the government and we’re here to help you” is often met with suspicion. “To get people to sign up, we have to earn their trust,” he said. People do not want unfamiliar contractors in their homes, Dillingham said, and they often suspect that the program is a scam.

Program staffers say they have found that reaching out to churches and getting church leaders on board is a very effective trust-building tool, especially in African-American communities. “If they [church leaders] trust us, the rest of the community will too,” according to Dillingham. The program also partners with three multi-service community centers in the city and staffs tables at these centers on a weekly basis. Program representatives call people who live near the centers and have submitted incomplete weatherization applications and tell them they can come by the center to get help finishing the application.

REEP organizes block parties that can attract hundreds of residents. Staff also conducts door-to-door canvassing and advertises in local newspapers, radio, television, and in the city’s public transit system. The program used to send a letter to every household in their target neighborhoods; they have stopped because the response rate was low.

Contractors have proven to be a very effective means of outreach by marketing the program while working in a neighborhood. When contractors weatherize a home, they visit neighboring homes and talk to residents or leave door hangers. These residents then can talk to their neighbor who just got his home weatherized and confirm that the program is legitimate. When contractors are working on a house, they put a sign in the yard that says, “this house is being weatherized at no cost, ask us to sign up.”

To understand the efficacy of different marketing strategies, the City of Houston commissioned a survey of 500 eligible households in a neighborhood of 10,000 families. The survey found that concern about energy bills and the possibility for reducing bills was the main reason why households were interested in REEP. The city’s survey also found that significantly more households said they would participate if they knew that their neighbors were also participating. At least in this particular neighborhood, attitudes towards the city government did not significantly influence peoples’ willingness to participate.

## **Impact and Evaluation**

The program aims to weatherize more than half of eligible homes in target neighborhoods. REEP staff report they are close to this target although the results vary by neighborhood. In one neighborhood, 95% of homes were weatherized. Yet in another neighborhood, a con man pretended to be from the city and scammed a lot of residents, so the weatherization program got very little traction. In follow-up surveys, 90-95% of households that participated in the program reported satisfaction with the weatherization. Thus far, the program has weatherized



more than 8,300 households in twelve neighborhoods. The program has reached about 36% of eligible homes.

The program's 2010-2011 budget is \$23 million over 2 years, and plans call for weatherizing 5,300 homes. The average amount spent per home is \$3,000 to \$3,500 (not including administrative expenses). The program is administered by 5.5 fulltime Houston city staff, including a marketing and outreach manager, which accounts for 2.5% of the total program budget.

REEP staff say that gaining trust of neighborhoods has been the biggest challenge. The Houston experience suggests that working with community leaders and reaching out to the neighbors of people who have had their homes weatherized can be effective strategies in gaining trust. Program staff has been able to try a number of different marketing and outreach strategy to try to understand which are effective. According to Gavin Dillingham, successful outreach is “a matter of trying a variety of marketing methods and seeing what works in your particular context.”